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### The Parents of Abraham Lincoln

By IDA M. TARBELL



SATURDAY, Dec. 2nd, 1861  
IDA M. TARBELL

Among the many wrongs of history, and they are legion—there is none in our American chapter at least which is graver than that which has been done the parents, and particularly the mother, of Abraham Lincoln. Of course, I refer to the widespread tradition that Lincoln was born of that "class known in the South as "poor whites," that his father was not Thomas Lincoln, as his biographers insist on declaring, but a rich and cultured planter of another State than Kentucky, and that his mother not only gave a fatherless boy to the world, but herself was a nameless child. The tradition has always lacked particularity. For instance, there has been large differences of opinion about the planter who fathered Abraham, who he was and where he came from. One story calls him Enloe, another Calhoun, another Hardin, and several different States claim him. Only five years ago a book was published in North Carolina to prove that Lincoln's father was a resident of that State. The bulk of the testimony offered in this instance came from men and women who had been born long after Abraham Lincoln, had never seen him, and never heard the tale, they repeated until long after his election to the Presidency. Of the truth of these statements as to Lincoln's origin, no proof has ever been produced. They were rumors diligently spread in the first place by those who for political purposes were glad to

belittle a political opponent. They grew with telling, and, curiously enough, two of Lincoln's best friends helped perpetuate them—Messrs. Lamon and Herndon—both of whom wrote lives of the President which are of great interest and value. But neither of these men was a student, and they did not take the trouble to look for records of Mr. Lincoln's birth. They accepted rumors and enlarged upon them. Indeed, it was not until perhaps twenty-five years ago that the matter was taken up seriously, and an investigation begun. There has been going on at intervals ever since, until I venture to say that few persons born in a pioneer com-



The Log Cabin in Which Lincoln Was Born.

munity as Lincoln was, and his early life as 1809, have their lineage on both sides as clearly established as that of Abraham Lincoln. It takes indeed, a most amazing credulity for any one to believe the stories I have alluded to after having looked at the records of his family. Lincoln himself, backed by the record in the Lincoln family Bible, is the first authority for the time and place of his birth, as well as the name of his father and mother. The father, Thomas Lincoln, far

from being a "poor white" was the son of a prosperous Kentucky pioneer, a man of honorable and well-established lineage who had come from Virginia as a friend of Daniel Boone, and had there bought large tracts of land and begun to grow up with the country, where he was killed by the Indians. He left a large family. By the law of Kentucky the estate went mainly to the oldest son, and the youngest, Thomas, was left to shift for himself. This youngest son grew to manhood, and on June 10, 1806, was married, at Beechland, Kentucky, to a young woman of a family well known in the vicinity. Nancy Hanks. There is no doubt whatever about the time and the place of the marriage. All the legal documents required in Kentucky at that period for a marriage are in existence. Not only have we the bond and the certificate, but the marriage is duly entered in a list of marriage returns made by Jesse Head, one of the best-known early Methodist ministers of Kentucky. It is now to be seen in the records of Washington County, Kentucky. There is even in existence a very full and amusing account of the wedding and the fanfare which fol-

lowed by a guest who was present, and who for years after was accustomed to visit Thomas and Nancy. The guest, Christopher Columbus Graham, a unique and perfectly trustworthy man, a prominent citizen of Louisville, died only a few years ago. But while these documents dispose effectually of the question of the parentage of Lincoln, they do not, of course, clear up the shadow which hangs over the parentage of his mother. Is there any-

thing to show that Nancy Hanks herself was of as clear and elegant lineage as her husband? There had been nothing whatever until, a few years ago, through the efforts of Mrs. Caroline Hanks Hitecock of Cambridge, Mass., who had in preparation the genealogy of the Hanks family in America, a little volume was published, showing what she had established in regard to Nancy Hanks. Mrs. Hitecock had begun at the far end of the line—the arrival of one Benjamin Hanks in Massachusetts in 1699. She discovered that one of his sons, William, moved to Virginia and that in the latter part of the eighteenth century his children formed in Amelia County of that State a large settlement. All the records of these families she found in the Hall of Records in Richmond. When the migration into Kentucky began late in the century it was joined by many members of the Hanks settlement in Amelia County. Among others to go was Joseph Hanks with his wife, Nancy Shipley Hanks, and their children. Mrs. Hitecock traced this Joseph Hanks, by means of land records to Nelson County, Kentucky, where she found that he died in 1793, leaving behind a will, which she discovered in the records of Bardonia, Kentucky. This will show that at the time of his death Joseph Hanks had eight living children, to whom he bequeathed property. The youngest of these was "My daughter Nancy" as the will puts it.

marriage returns not only showed that Nancy Hanks and Thomas Lincoln were married regularly three years before the birth of Abraham Lincoln, thus settling forever the rest the story of Lincoln's illegitimacy, but they showed that this Nancy Hanks was the one named in the will. The suspicion in regard to the origin of Lincoln's mother was removed by this discovery of the will, for the recognition of any one as his child by a man in his will is considered by the law as sufficient proof of paternity.

Now what sort of people were Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks? It has been inferred by those who have made no investigation of Thomas Lincoln's life that Nancy Hanks made a very poor choice of a husband. The facts do not entirely warrant this theory. Thomas Lincoln had been forced from his boyhood to shift for himself in a plain and undeveloped country. He is known to have been a man who in spite of his wandering life contracted no bad habits. He was temperate and honest, and his name is recorded in more than one place in the records of Kentucky. He was a church-goer, and, if tradition may be believed a stout defender of his peculiar religious views. He held advanced ideas of what was already an important public question in Kentucky, the right to hold negroes as slaves. One of his old friends has said of him and his wife, Nancy Hanks, that they were "just steeped full of notions about the wrongs of slavery and the rights of men, as explained by Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine." These facts show that he must have been a man of some natural intelligence. He had a trade and owned a farm.

That the two people who endured their hardships and made in spite of them a home where a boy could conceive and nourish such ideals and enthusiasm as inspired Abraham Lincoln from his early years should have their names darkened by unfounded suspicions is a cruel injustice against which every honest and patriotic American ought to set his face. If in carrying out the noble project of making a National Park of the Kentucky farm where Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks made their first home the directors do nothing more than to set forth the facts of the parentage of Abraham Lincoln they will justify their undertaking.

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